

President U Thein Sein gives an interview with Ms Eizabeth Graham Weymouth, Senior Associate Editor of The Washington Post



NAY PYI TAW, 20 Jan- President of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar U Thein Sein received Senior Associate Editor Ms. Eizabeth Graham Weymouth of The Washington Post and party at the Presidential Residence in Nay Pyi Taw at 3 pm on 17 January, 2012 and responded to the questions.

Also present at the interview together with the President were Union Minister for Foreign Affairs U Wunna Maung Lwin, Union Minister for Information and for Culture U Kyaw Hsan and Union Minister for Labour U Aung Kyi.

The following is the complete questions and answers during the interview between the President and the Washington Post.

President: Welcome you. The Washington Post is a very influential one. This is the first time for me to give interview to a foreign media as the President. Also together here with me are the Union Minister for Foreign Affairs, Union Minister for Information and for Culture and Union Minister for Labour. I am receiving you not only as a media personnel but also as a visitor to our country.

Washington Post: I usually ask a lot of questions during my interview. Especially, I hope I can ask many questions with regard to the reforms that the President is currently carrying out.

President: I will answer your questions. If you are not clear about any matter, you can ask me again.

Washington Post: I will start the questions. The whole world is interested in the current reform process in Myanmar. Particularly, the international community is watching with great interest on the release of political prisoners, dialogue with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and ceasefire with the armed ethnic groups. So, what are the main driving forces for all these reforms?

President: The main driving forces behind all these reforms today in Myanmar are actually the people of Myanmar. Because we are striving to fulfill the will of the people and undertaking reforms. People want to have peace and stability in the country. Then, they want their country to be economically developed and become a modern and developed country. That is the will of the people today. We are doing these reforms to fulfill that will of the people. It is important to achieve peace and

stability, economic development and harmony with the internal political forces as desired by the people. That's why, we met with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and achieved mutual understanding and political situation inside the country has become more stable. Another point is that the people wish to have peace in the country. Therefore, we offered olive branch to the armed ethnic groups and negotiations are being carried out. Therefore, our efforts in the reforms process are based on the people's desire. The people are the main driving forces.

Washington Post: I would say even though all these efforts are the will of the people, in fact you took the initiative. Mr. President, you yourself met with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. So, I would like to know how do you see the future of Myanmar?

President: In future, I hope Myanmar will have more transparency and better relations with countries around the world.

Washington Post: Mr. President you have met with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. You took initiative to do these reforms. So, I would like to know whether you will continue to carry out these reforms in the future?

President: Our aim is to have peace and stability in the country and for the national economic development. Thus, we have to continue our efforts to fulfill these aims for the peace and stability and further economic developments for the country.

Washington Post: If I may say exactly Mr. President, you have done to normalize relationship with the United States. You have released political prisoners. You have reached ceasefire with some armed ethnic groups to achieve peace. Therefore, how do you foresee what are the requirements in order to proceed the reform process in the future? What will you do in the future?

President: We will continue our serious effort to have peace and stability in the country.

Respective laws have been amended by the Hluttaw in order for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to be able to participate in the elections. She herself re-registered the NLD as political party and soon, she will be contesting in the upcoming by-election. If people elected her, she will be in the Hluttaw as a member of parliament. If she is elected, the Hluttaw will warmly welcome her.

Another matter is regarding armed ethnic groups, first we had to build trust with them. We have signed agreements on common agreeable points. There are many things to be done for the internal peace. Whether they have come to the legal fold with or without arms, the main necessary things for them are food, clothing and shelter, health and education for their well-being.

We have to continue to fulfill their needs.

Washington Post: I read in the newspaper. Which group you have reached ceasefire agreement with? Is it Karen group?

President: There are altogether (11) armed ethnic groups. In the first step, we have to discuss with them to achieve mutual understanding and agreement at State level.

Then, we assigned separate groups to have meetings with them on behalf of the government. We have been engaged with all groups. We have already signed agreement with some of whom we engaged.

However, the peace process is not finished yet. We have to continue our negotiations with them to reach agreement.

Washington Post: Are they making peace after reaching agreement with the government?

President: We will negotiate to get mutual agreement in building peace. In order to achieve lasting peace, every armed group has to come to the legal fold, and live under one law in equality. To reach this stage, we have to take time and negotiate with them.

Washington Post: Do you have any plan to give a position in the cabinet to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi if she won the election and becoming a member of parliament?

President: Firstly, it depends on whether she will be elected by the people or not in the election. If she is elected by the people, she will be in the Hluttaw. Secondly, it is required to get approval from the Hluttaw to submit name for the cabinet member. A cabinet appointment can be made only after getting approval from the Hluttaw. All the current cabinet Ministers are also appointed by the approval of Hluttaw.

Washington Post: Do you want to see Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as a cabinet Minister?

President: We will accept anyone as a cabinet Minister who is appointed by the approval of the Hluttaw.

Washington Post: How would you like to see Myanmar-US relations? What do you expect?

President: Currently there have been a lot of engagements between Myanmar and the US. The US Secretary of State has visited here. I've received Senator McConnell just this morning. Our expectation is first, we would like to have friendly relations not only with the US but also with all countries of the world.

Second, we would like to up grade our diplomatic relations at Ambassador level since we do not have Ambassadorial level with the United States right now.

Third, US and EU have imposed economic sanctions against our country for over 20 years.

Therefore, we want easing of economic sanctions.

This desire is not only of the President alone but also the desire of the majority of the people.

Washington Post: In recent months, you have done a lot with great effort to successfully implement the reform process. I have heard that a few days ago, the US Secretary of State Ms. Clinton made an announcement that Myanmar-US relations to be normalized and Ambassadors will be appointed again. Have you heard about this new?

President: Yes, I heard. But until now Ambassador has not been appointed yet.

Washington Post: Yes, true. Some matters are slow in Washington. I hope you have heard about this from Senator Mc Connell.

President: There are (3) concerns of the western countries regarding Myanmar. The first concern is the release of the so-called political prisoners. Second concern is holding of by-elections. Third concern is for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her groups to be included in the political process. These (3) concerns are what the western countries have been asking from us. Now, I have dealt with all the (3) concerns. Myanmar has done her part. The rest is for US and EU to do their parts.

Besides, we have done these things, neither by anyone's recommendation nor by any coercion, as a necessity of the present situation of the country.

Washington Post: Did you do it because of the pressure?

President: No. Not because of pressure. Those are things that must be done in accordance with the changing system.

Washington Post: Did you do such reform because of the sanctions? United States thinks that sanction is effective on Myanmar.

President: Frankly speaking the previous military government did not fall because of the sanctions. The military government transferred the state responsibility after taking necessary reforms to establish a democratic government. Sanction, therefore, did not affect the government. However, the people had suffered. They are hard hit. Sanction had caused poverty to the people.

Washington Post: President, are you referring to the 7-step road map laid down by Senior General Than Shwe?

President: Right. The previous government did not fall.

Sanction could not cause the government to fall. At the very beginning the government had the intention to undertake democratic reform. In pursuant to their intention, the 7-step road map was laid down and implemented step by step. Finally, a government which practices the democratic system was formed.

Washington Post: Did the 7-step road map pave the way to democracy?

President: Right.

Washington Post: A few people from outside know about this matter. During the dinner with Senator Mitchell McConnell, I came to understand that the reforms process in Myanmar have been arranged many years back.

President: There are many countries that are in trouble today due to hasty democratic transformation. As you are well aware, these countries became almost collapse because of their hasty democratic change within a short period of time. That's why we have laid down the 7-step road map and took time to change step by step. Eventually, now a government practicing democratic system has emerged.

Washington Post: Is it true that 25% of the seat in Hluttaw will be allocated to Tatmadaw? It is found that Tatmadaw also has been involved in the present reform process. I believe that democracy is the rule of people, and government has the authority over military forces.

President: Tatmadaw does not interfere in the administration.

As you see, one fourth of Hluttaw members are from armed forces. Country like Myanmar could not neglect the armed forces. Tatmadaw is providing assistance in building the country. Armed forces never interfere in the administration.

Washington Post: We understand that armed forces must be involved. However, I would like to stress that people's power must prevail. The people's power shall prevail over everything. In US, the President's power is greater than Chief of the Armed Forces.

President: Right. It is the same in Myanmar. You should study a little on Myanmar Constitution. In accordance with the Constitution, the President appoints the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces.

Washington Post: Next is relationship with DPRK. Recently, Republican Senator Lugar has accused that Myanmar is implementing a nuclear program with the assistance of DPRK. So, I would like to know if there is any likelihood of abolishing military cooperation between Myanmar and DPRK.

President: We have diplomatic relations with DPRK. Apart from this diplomatic relations, there are no other relationship on nuclear or weapons of mass destruction weapons. These are all suspicions on us.

Because Myanmar is a country always advocating nuclear non-proliferation in the international forums.

Moreover, Myanmar is a country that strictly follows the UN Resolutions. In fact, we have no relations with North Korea in terms of nuclear weapon and other weapons. North Korea is not a country in a position to provide assistance to Myanmar. Myanmar is also not a country enough to produce the nuclear weapon.

This is just groundless accusation.

Washington Post: If so, Mr. President, will you allow the IAEA investigation mission to come to Myanmar?

President: First step, we have to sign the IAEA Additional Protocol. This matter is under consideration. We have to submit this matter to Hluttaw. Having the approval from Hluttaw and after signing the IAEA Additional Protocol, further consideration will be taken on the matter of receiving the IAEA investigation mission. For the time being, we have not yet reached the step of signing the said Protocol.

Washington Post: Can you tell me anything that you wish to convey to the American readers?

President: I wish to say that the present government is a government elected by the people to practice the democratic system. We are already on the path of democracy. As we are already on the path of democracy, we will proceed forward and there is no reason to turn back. However, the new government has been in office only for nine months. We have little experience in democracy. Democratic practices are still weak. We could not be compared on par with the American who has practiced democracy for more than hundred years. There are two main requirements to flourish democracy. The first requirement is peace and stability of the country. We have been implementing this. We have also engaged with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. We are working with the ethnic groups to achieve peace. The second requirement is the economic development that create job opportunities for the people and improve the socioeconomic life of the people. So that democracy will flourish. We are also working on it. For the time being, job opportunities are very low in Myanmar. As a result, about three million Myanmar immigrant workers are working in other countries. The current poverty rate in Myanmar is 26%. This is the result of the economic sanctions imposed against Myanmar for more than twenty years. Economic sanctions only resulted in lost of job opportunities, creating poverty, and then increase jobless rate. The people are affected.

So, if you wish Myanmar to continue practicing democracy, and democracy to flourish, you should work together to lift the economic sanctions. Such a powerful paper like Washington Post should urge for this.

Washington Post: US Senator Mitch McConnell himself is an active person in matters concerning sanction. I've learnt that even he is on your side. You, yourself told that development of the country is important. Are you going to privatize the country? Or, I wish to know whether you are going to invite foreign investment to Myanmar?

President: Right. We always welcome foreign investments.

We have amended the foreign investment laws in order for them to do investment in Myanmar without difficulty. However, only when the sanctions were lifted, they will come and invest with confidence.

Washington Post: But, the investors could also question about the rule of law in Myanmar.

President: Now, the country is stable. We now have cease fire with armed groups in border areas. In fact, the main difficulty for the investors is the sanctions.

There are no other difficulties.

Washington Post: You have accomplished many things within nine months. Furthermore, how are you going to do for freedom of media? Particularly, I would like to know about the Media law of 1960. I wish also to know whether private daily newspaper will be allowed to publish. I would like to know because my family owns the Washington Post.

President: With regard to media, you will also notice. It is not like previous government's time. Journals have been written freely. However, as I told you we have very little democratic experience. Therefore, while allowing freedom of press, we are taking measures to ensure that freedom with responsibility, freedom with accountability, freedom with rationalism and discipline will be applied. Responsibility and accountability also come with freedom.

Washington Post: Will censor be abolished upon the freedom of media?

President: For the time being, media freedom is granted. Law will be enacted.